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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001422

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SAAD HARIRI ON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

REF: A. BEIRUT 1407

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1334

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador on 9/15, MP Saad Hariri portrayed none of the proclivity to compromise on Lebanon's presidency that Walid Jumblatt darkly suspected only a few days earlier (ref a). Calling Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri "a liar," Hariri said that he was prepared to "go all the way with Nassib (Lahoud)" in creating a March 14 presidency. At the same time, he would call Berri's bluff by continuing to offer to form a committee to explore the possibility of a consensus candidate. He did not expect Berri to be able to go beyond LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, whom Hariri described as an unacceptable choice given the constitutional amendment required. Hariri was withering in his criticism of Boutros Harb, the fall-back March 14 presidential candidate, whom Hariri saw as pandering shamelessly to Berri, with the latter using Harb merely to divide March 14. Hariri, however, had one worry: what to do if March 8 leaders offered to back MP Robert Ghanem as a consensus candidate. Hariri described Ghanem as someone who "has stood with us when we needed him," such as in backing the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. But, while decent, he would be weak. But "how can we say no?" Hariri asked, appearing sincere in seeking an answer. End summary.

GOING ALL THE WAY WITH NASSIB

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador met with Hariri one-on-one on 9/15 and asked Hariri what his real strategy was on the presidency. Without hesitation, Hariri said that he intended to "go all the way with Nassib (Lahoud)." Praising Lahoud's presentation two days earlier of his presidential vision, Hariri praised Nassib as "the best possible candidate Lebanon could have." Hariri said that Lahoud has engendered so much opposition from March 8 figures because they know that he "can't be bought." The Ambassador said that he wondered whether that same high standard might also make Saad prefer a weaker, less independent figure. "Come on," Hariri growled. "We're going to push Nassib."

CONFIDENT MARCH 14 WILL REMAIN UNITED

[1](#)3. (C) Hariri seemed confident that, if the time came when

March 14 would have to employ an absolute majority without a two-thirds quorum to elect Nassib, bloc discipline would prevail. He claimed to have reconciled with one of his MPs, former Justice Minister Bahije Tabbarah, who was now solidly back in the March 14 camp. He agreed that MP Mohamed Safadi is drifting toward March 8, but he thought that Saudi pressure (given Safadi's business ties in Saudi Arabia) could bring him back. Given their shared north Lebanon constituencies, Samir Geagea could be relied upon to pressure Boutros Harb.

BOUTROS HARB: BERRI WON'T SUPPORT HIM

14. (C) The Ambassador asked Hariri whether he thought that Boutros Harb would succeed in getting Berri on his side, thus making Harb the preferred March 14 candidate over Nassib and eliminating the need for confronting March 8's two-thirds quorum argument. Using colorful language of a sexual nature, Hariri accused Harb of pandering to Berri. "Your should have heard him at the March 14 meeting (on 9/12); every third word from Boutros' mouth was 'Nabih.' Nabih this, Nabih that." In Hariri's view, Berri is only playing with Harb to divide March 14. Harb, Hariri pointed out, was a founder of the Qornet Shehwan Christian opposition group, one of the earliest domestic organizations critical of Syria. Syria will never permit Berri to back Harb. Harb is "kidding himself."

CALLING BERRI'S BLUFF
THROUGH REQUEST FOR UNCONDITIONAL TALKS

15. (C) While preparing to push Nassib, Hariri said that

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March 14 would also call Berri's bluff by continuing to call for unconditional talks on a consensus candidate. March 14 leaders will refer positively to Berri's initiative, but use French Foreign Minister Kouchner's comments to reinforce their call for talks without pre-conditions. Hariri spoke about the possibility of a small committee to consider names, but he did not expect Berri to respond. "Berri is a liar." Maybe as November 14 (the start of the last ten days of Emile Lahoud's presidential term, when constitutional rules change) approaches Berri will realize that it is better for him to sit down, Hariri said. But, referring to messages sent between the Berri's and Hariri's office, Berri is not yet ready for a genuine compromise, Hariri thought.

BERRI MIGHT OFFER SLEIMAN,
BUT MARCH 14 WON'T ACCEPT

16. (C) Asked whether he thought that a consensus candidate might eventually emerge, Hariri shook his head. He thought that Berri would only be able to offer LAF Commander Sleiman as a compromise. And March 14 will not vote for Sleiman, Hariri said, because March 14 has agreed to oppose the necessary constitutional amendment that would permit Sleiman (and, according to most observers, Central Bank Governor Salameh) to become president without the requisite two-year cooling-off period. Hariri acknowledged that Berri will put March 14 in a very tough spot by forcing them to oppose Sleiman, who has broad public support in the aftermath of the Nahr al-Barid fight. The Ambassador asked about Minister of Justice Charles Rizk. Berri and Hizballah will veto Rizk under Syrian orders, given Rizk's role in establishing the Special Tribunal, Hariri responded. If March 14 is going to have to fight to create a president, then March 14 will fight for Nassib Lahoud, not Charles Rizk.

BUT WHAT TO DO ABOUT ROBERT GHANEM?

17. (C) As the meeting was coming to a close, Hariri asked,

"but what do we do about Robert Ghanem?" After a pause, he explained that his fear was that Berri, responding to March 14 rejections of Michel Aoun and Michel Sleiman, might then table the name of MP Robert Ghanem. "What do we do then?" Ghanem is a decent person, Hariri noted. He "stood with us when we needed him," such as in supporting the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and demanding that parliament be permitted to meet. But he is weak and, due to his Biqa' valley base, susceptible to Syrian pressure. If Berri were smart, Hariri said, he'd propose Ghanem. "That would corner us." With apparent sincerity, Hariri asked rhetorically, "how can we say no?" No constitutional amendment is required, and Ghanem is civilian, not military. The Ambassador proposed that he pitch that question to his fellow March 14 leaders in an attempt to come up with an acceptable answer that would not drive Ghanem -- and his parliamentary vote -- into the March 8 camp.

COMMENT

18. (C) Whether as performance or out of conviction, Hariri came across as confident and determined. The subject of his ambition to be PM that so worried Walid Jumblatt two days earlier (ref a) did not come up in this meeting. And Hariri's strategy for the presidency strikes us as sensible, at least for the immediate future: shore up March 14 ranks, in case one needs to use an absolute majority to vote in Nassib Lahoud in the last days of Emile Lahoud's mandate; offer to form a committee with March 8-Aoun forces, in an attempt to find consensus candidates; and use the pressure of an impending election of Nassib Lahoud to see if Berri will blink. The trouble is that we are not as convinced as Hariri that March 14 will remain sufficiently united for the absolute majority election of Nassib Lahoud that is Hariri's ultimate trump card. Unless the Saudis really pressure Safadi, we cannot imagine him joining an absolute majority vote, for example.

19. (C) But we have to ask ourselves the same question Saad posed: what about Robert Ghanem? Weak and uninspiring -- albeit decent -- as Ghanem is, we would be in no place to reject him if he emerged as a genuine consensus candidate. We believe that Saad was sincere in raising the possibility of Ghanem as a hypothetical dilemma. But we also have to

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consider that Saad was, instead, testing our reaction, indicating that he has received or has transmitted a message to Berri about the acceptability of Ghanem as a compromise. We remember that, no so long ago, Ghanem's name was one of only four survivors on a list of presidential candidates written down and then crossed out by Berri (ref b).
FELTMAN